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Beale Wagon Road Historic Trail

Railroad survey team camped at Russel's Tank on the Beale Wagon Road, December 1867.

Photo courtesy of the Boston Public Library.

United States Department of Agriculture

PREPARED BY Forest Service

Kaibab National Forest

Beale Wagon Road

In 1848, at the end of the Mexican-American War, the United States found itself the new owner of a virtually trackless wilderness on its southwestern corner. Eager to provide access to this region of rugged deserts, deep canyons, and rocky plateaus, Congress sent a number of expeditions to explore the area. In 1857, it commissioned the southwest's first federally funded interstate road to be built through the heart of the new lands to California. The expedition sent to survey and construct that road was as unique as its appointed task.

A retired Navy Lieutenant, Edward Fitzgerald Beale was chosen to chart the road's course through hundreds of miles of desert. Twenty-two camels, fresh from the Middle East, were provided to carry supplies and tools for Beale and his crew of 50 men.The Lieutenant found these "ships of the desert" surprisingly effective at packing heavy loads across the dry, rocky landscape, but his experiment failed in the eyes of muleskinners who considered the animals foul smelling, evil tempered, and ugly. The Lieutenant's roadbuilding efforts, however, proved much more successful.

By modern standards, Beale's road was modest, to say the least. In most places it amounted to no more than a 10-foot wide track with the rocks pushed to the side to smooth the way for wagons. Yet it provided a serviceable route for 1,240 miles, from Ft. Smith, Arkansas to the Colorado River, all for the bargain price of $210,000, an amount that would produce only 1,000 feet of interstate highway today.

Historians are mixed in their assessment of the impact of Beale Road. Some say it rivaled the Oregon/ California Trail in the amount of traffic it carried west. Others say hostile Indians and the disruption of westward migration by the Civil War kept it from ever achieving that kind of success. History and the wagon ruts tell us, however, that uncounted thousands followed its simple tracks. Millions of sheep and cattle were driven along its course. Beale's humble road continued to serve both immigrants and stockmen until the construction of the Atlantic and Pacific (Santa Fe) Railroad in 1883.

The transcontinental routes that replaced the Beale Road provide another testimonial to its worth. The Santa Fe Railroad, Route 66, and Interstate 40, all more or less follow its course. As such, they bear strong testimony to Beale's ability as a pathfinder and affirm the value of the route he pioneered.

Today, the section of Beale Wagon Road that passes through the Kaibab National Forest is maintained as a recreational trail. This 23-mile stretch of Beale's route includes portions which he singled out as the most beautiful of his entire journey. Some segments of it are still being used as rural byways. Other stretches have been abandoned, and evidence of the historic roadway has all but completely disappeared. In a few places the original roadbed is still visible as a slight depression in the rocky soil or as two lines of rocks setting a straight course across the prairie.

Those who wish to retrace the steps of Lt. Beale and the pioneers who followed his lead will find the road clearly marked for its entire course across the Forest. You can follow along step-by-step if you wish and thrill to the same broad vistas that Lt.. Beale described as "unsurpassed in the world." Or you can drive to interpretive stations located at strategic places along the road and enjoy highlights of this historic route.

The Beale Road in Government Prairie, with the San Francisco Peaks in the background.

Pioneering Beale Road Today

Beale Wagon Road no longer leads hardy settlers west, but it does offer modern day pilgrims a chance to travel back into the colorful era of the pioneers. On the Kaibab National Forest significant portions of the landscape through which the road winds remain in nearly the same condition as they were when Lt. Beale first encountered them in 1857.

High mountains set a dramatic backdrop for the broad grasslands of Government Prairie and inspire visions of the limitless landscape that welcomed Beale and his camel caravan. Ponderosa pine forests still cover the slopes of those mountains, many of which have been named after noted explorers, including Beale himself. Extensive stands of piñon-juniper woodlands continue to challenge the modern day pathfinder near historic campsites at Laws Spring and Russel's Tank.

While you're taking this trip into the past, don't forget to notice the present. Traveling Beale Road offers forest visitors an excellent opportunity to observe current as well as historic uses of public lands. As you retrace Beale's steps watch for evidence of sheep and cattle grazing, of timber sales and reforestation projects, of hunters, woodcutters, and recreationists all here, just as you are, to make use of some feature of this diverse and productive land.

The Wind Breathes History

"There are spots of the old road off the beaten path where one can still go, shut out the sound of motors, and hear on the wind the grating of the iron ringed wheels on the rocks, the thud of hoofs on the sand and, perhaps, if the wind is right, the indignant groan of a camel."

Beale's Road Through Arizona
Eldon G. Bowman and Jack Beale Smith

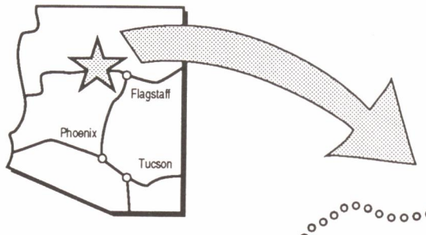
Photo courtesy of the National Archives

"My admiration for the camels increases daily... they pack water for others for days under a hot sun and never get a drop; they pack corn and oats for months and never get a grain; and on the bitter greasewood and other worthless shrubs not only subsist but keep fat. I look forward to the day when every mail route across the continent will be conducted and worked by this economical brute."

Lt. Edward F. Beale
September 21, 1857

Beale Wagon Road

Although Lt. Edward F. Beale retained a degree of notoriety for his experiment with bringing camels into the American Southwest, the road he built lapsed into obscurity rather quickly. It remained almost forgotten for nearly a century until a few history buffs set out in the mid-1970's to retrace its course. A Flagstaff grocery store stock clerk named Jack Smith adopted the old road as a project for his master's thesis and became so enthusiastic about the project that he even changed his middle name to Beale. By studying government documents, nineteenth-century maps, and the Lieutenant's personal diaries, Smith and others relocated the historic route across Northern Arizona and in the process reopened the door to a unique chapter in Arizona history.



The meticulously engraved "Laws Spring," on a basalt boulder at this major water stop is believed to have been the work of a tombstone engraver who was part of Beale's first expedition. A stretch of the original roadbed is visible nearby.

Trail Ownership

The Beale Wagon Road traverses both public and private lands within the Kaibab National Forest boundaries. On Forest lands the road is plainly marked and open for the public to enjoy within the limits of Forest regulations, including those which govern vehicle access and other recreational activities. Where the road crosses private property, this guide offers an alternate route around that land which returns to Beale's original course as directly as possible. Please respect private property boundaries and request permission before crossing or entering these lands.

Russel's Tank with its cool, clear water and plentiful wildlife was a popular stop for pioneers along the Beale Road. Today it is a good place to linger over a picnic lunch and compare the current conditions of the area to that shown in the historic photo on the cover of this brochure.

Here portions of the original roadbed are still visible as two straight lines of rocks piled about a wagon track (ten feet) apart. The remains of pioneer homesteads that sprang up beside the well-traveled immigrant route also serve as evidence of the road's original alignment.

N

one mile

Legend

- Beale Wagon Road
- State & Private Land
- Interpretive Site & parking
- P Parking
- Paved Road
- Dirt or Gravel Road
- Auto Tour
- Forest Boundary
- FR Forest Road

Russel's Tank
FR 142
FR 124
FR 142
Ashfork
146
40
Kaibab National Forest
FR 124
163
161
Williams
64
FR 84
FR 707
FR 115
FR 712
FR 712
FR 713
FR 730
FR 141
FR 97
FR 141
Laws Spring
FR 74
Sitgreaves Mountain
Spring Valley
Government Prairie
FR 100
Kendrick Mountain
FR 141
FR 107
FR 171
167
171
66
Parks
178
66
to Flagstaff 10 miles

Printed 9/90 on recycled stock.

Hike, Bring Your Horse (or Camel) But . . .

Travel on stretches of Beale Wagon Road which have remained relatively undisturbed since the days of pioneers is restricted to the same modes of transportation available to the Lieutenant and his expedition. That excludes passenger cars, 4-wheel drive vehicles, ATCs, dirt bikes, and mountain bikes.

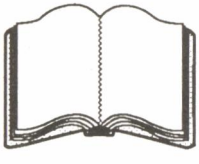
But this doesn't mean you have to "rough it" to visit this historic attraction. You can retrace Beale's historic journey in your car or on your mountain bike where Beale Road now exists as a Forest Service road or closely parallels one. Interpretive stations and parking areas further enhance the route's accessibility near locations that have special historic significance or offer outstanding recreation opportunities. Consult the map found on the inside of this brochure.

Please remember to leave historic sites, artifacts and other cultural remains undisturbed for others to enjoy.

For more information about Beale Wagon Road contact:

Northern Arizona Natural History Association
P.O. Box 1633
Flagstaff, AZ 86002
(602) 527-7474

Read more about Historic Beale Wagon Road. Visit your local library or book store.



Recreational maps of the Kaibab National Forest can be purchased at your local Forest Service office or sporting goods store.

For More Information On This Trail, Contact:

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